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# Review of *Crossing Over to Canaan* by Gloria Ladson-Billings

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# Book Review of *Crossing Over to Canaan* by Gloria Ladson-Billings

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Ladson-Billings' choice of metaphor of 'crossing over to Canaan' is a painfully apt way of capturing the frustrating struggle in the US to create teacher education programmes that prepare teachers to teach effectively in schools serving poor students and students of colour. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, the Promised Land of Canaan held its allure, just out of reach, for Moses and the Children of Israel during 40 long years of wandering in the wilderness. At least 40 years have passed since the US Supreme Court ordered desegregation of public education, beginning the journey into the diversity apparent in schools in the US today. Are we, at last, at the juncture of crossing over into a Promised Land, or is our sojourn in the wilderness of ineffective instruction and disparity in the achievement of diverse students bound to continue even longer? *Crossing Over to Canaan* makes no promises that the sojourn is over, but it does create a clearer vision of the long-awaited Promised Land and, in so doing, raises hope and suggests possibilities.

Ladson-Billings describes the goal of *Crossing Over to Canaan* as two-fold: to explore how teacher educators might 'think differently' about preparing teachers to work effectively with diverse students; and to consider what novice teachers can teach us about that process. Research conducted on the experiences of a cohort of prospective

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teachers participating in Teaching for Diversity (TFD), the graduate-level teacher education programme instituted at her urban university in the US Midwest, forms the basis for the book. As with her previous work, Ladson-Billings includes appendices detailing her research methodology and context so that the focus of the text remains primarily on the story being told. The result is a lucid explication of Ladson-Billings' previously developed theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, compellingly demonstrated in the prospective teachers' reflections and field experiences.

Ladson-Billings begins with a rationale for reform in teacher education, using as her backdrop a description of the current context of US education. She points out the dilemma of increasing cultural, racial, and linguistic disparity among students and teachers; the need for prospective teachers to grasp and apply the intersection of content, pedagogy, and critical theory demanded by that disparity; and the struggle of teacher education to adequately address that context. Ladson-Billings then begins the pattern, which continues throughout the book, of marrying theoretical discussion with examples of prospective teachers' practice that illustrate the issues raised. This pairing of theoretical discussion and praxis provides encouraging glimpses of what could happen if teacher education programmes were to successfully send out teachers who operate from a multicultural, social-reconstructivist perspective.

The cohort of eight prospective elementary teachers whose participation in the TFD programme illustrates Ladson-Billings' theory of culturally relevant pedagogy is introduced in the second chapter. Entering the TFD programme as graduate students, these prospective teachers brought a range of diverse life-experiences and cultural influences, even though all eight were female and six of the eight were White, one was African American, and one was Latina. The major point of commonality among the students was that each was admitted to the programme, in part, on the basis of an expressed interest in and willingness to confront issues of social justice.

In chapters 3-5, Ladson-Billings continues the wedding of the practice of novices, using the narratives and reflections of these eight

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prospective teachers, with theoretical discussions of the three foundational propositions of her theory of culturally relevant pedagogy:

- academic achievement;
- cultural competence; and
- sociopolitical consciousness.

In the discussion of the first area, academic achievement, the prospective teachers grappled with the perceptual limitations imposed by both their own inexperience and the contexts of their field experiences. The theme that consistently emerges is that academic achievement for diverse students hinges in large part on teachers' willingness to resist deficit-stereotypes that blame students, their families, and their communities for low academic achievement. From increasing clarity of learning goals to tying school curriculum to aspects of the students' lives to trying innovative methods of both instruction and assessment, the teachers that Ladson-Billings longs to see in US schools will embrace their personal responsibility for sparking student learning, and will recognize the critical need to turn from the ineffective powerlessness of placing either responsibility or accountability for student learning outside their own sphere of capability or responsibility.

In Ladson-Billings' discussion of cultural competence, which she defines as students' ability to understand and respect their own culture, the emphasis once again focuses on the teachers' responsibility to embrace change. She calls for teacher education programmes to frame their educational courses and field experiences with an anthropological lens. She wants prospective teachers, the vast majority of whom are White, to begin to see their own culture as one of many rather than the invisible norm around which the diversity of the 'Other' revolves, and, then, to develop a healthy appreciation for how powerfully all our cultural experiences impact our educational experiences. Particularly insightful is Ladson-Billings comment that the altruistic desire to 'help children' that motivates many teachers to enter the profession, in fact, frequently leaves teachers understanding the impact of culture as, at the most, insignificant, and, at the least, non-existent.

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Ladson-Billings backgrounds her discussion of the last proposition of culturally relevant pedagogy, socio-political awareness, with the long history of the US communities of colour that have used schools as sites of social-justice education, e.g. the Highlander Folk School's Citizenship Schools and the Student Non- Violent Coordinating Committee's Freedom Schools. The cohort of TFD students struggled to master both an understanding and an implementation of an effective practice marked by socio-political awareness. Their efforts centred on their experiences with service learning where, primarily because of the support of TFD discussions, many stereotypes were shattered; their efforts to incorporate social action in their classrooms, where even elementary-age students engaged in transformative social activism and critical media analysis; and their final reflective/research papers/projects where the prospective teachers applied a critical socio-political lens to their analysis of a variety of educational contexts, including pedagogy, policy, and personal cultural bias. The chapter effectively locates pedagogy in a sociopolitical context with the power to either liberate or oppress students. One of the most intriguing and insightful perspectives Ladson-Billings offers in this chapter is the necessity for teachers to see the connection between the success or failure of their students and the quality of life for themselves and all US society.

After this discussion and depiction of the elements of culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings concludes her book with her vision of what US teacher education ideally could become, weaving together some elements from TFD, some from other programmes, and some from the depths of her own creative thought. This vision, solidified in a mythical Urban Teacher Academy CUTA), would more stringently utilize what Ladson-Billings calls 'leverage points', junctures where prospective teachers who fail to demonstrate a growing acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions pre-requisite to excellent instruction of all students, especially those diverse students frequently marginalized by the system, would be removed from the pool of prospective teachers rather than being maintained at all costs, and then perfunctorily passed into the profession.

In addition to this winnowing process, the UT A Ladson-Billings

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envisions would provide a complex exposure to diversity throughout the mythical programme through a gathering of personnel, both faculty and student, rich in linguistic, cultural, and community diversity. The entire programme would include on-going field experiences for prospective teachers in contexts of diversity ranging from living with families in the school community, participating in service learning and teaching in small, diverse classes under the mentorship of proven colleagues. In the midst of this richness of diversity, hands-on experience, and support, the participants in the ideal UTA would engage in regular corporate and individual critical reflection of their teaching and learning experiences. Ladson-Billings' description of the coursework to be included in her ideal programme is curiously devoid of content specifics, and, instead, contains strong student accountability in the creation of portfolios and regular oral defences of progress and future direction.

The flights of fancy used to spin out an ideal programme, while encouraging, exciting and even, at times, grounded in existing programmes, is soon brought down to the sobering realism of actually doing the work of reforming US teacher education programmes. In that vein, Ladson-Billings provides an honest critique of the lessons, both successes and failures, learned by herself and her colleagues through the TFD. The impact of *Crossing Over to Canaan* does not depend on Ladson-Billings' TFD reaching the ideal, however. The value of this book resides in possibilities.

Ladson-Billings accomplishes her dual goal of exploring how teacher educators might 'think differently' about teacher education programmes and of considering what can be learned from the experiences of novice/prospective teachers. The juxtaposition of the two make the issues come alive in a compelling manner. More importantly, however, questions of how to arrive at effectively reformed teacher education programmes is enlivened through what has only begun to be covered in the text. For example, the narratives of the cohort of TFD participants reveal a self-selected group with an expressed interest in building their teaching practice around social justice. While they may have needed considerable instruction and support to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills, a significant amount of the necessary dispositions was already in place. The

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questions that are implicitly raised by this situation are: What processes led to the development of those dispositions among the prospective teachers? and What is the possibility of teacher education programmes replicating that development in other teachers desiring to enter the field?

The experiences and reflections of beginning teachers, used by Ladson-Billings as a source of knowledge for this text will continue to be a rich data source in efforts to answer the first of those questions. Beginning responses to the second question emerge from the individual stories of teacher education programmes, frequently operating in isolation, that are trying to embrace reform and be redesigned as institutions that centre social justice at the heart of their programme. Just as Ladson-Billings studied the effectiveness of the TFD programme and shared the findings, those programmes already venturing into areas of reform need to engage in significant and rigorous self-study, and pool their findings for the improvement of all. It is only with the kind of documentation that programmes that successfully prepare teachers for multicultural, social-reconstructivist practice, will become a reality. By weaving together the possibilities of an ideal teacher education programme while scrutiruzmg the strengths and weaknesses of her own existing programme, Ladson-Billings has provided a potential forum for other programmes to contribute to the knowledge-base of what reform will look like.

Moses wandered 40 years in the wilderness with a people who were recalcitrant in thinking and resistant to change. He was waiting for the old generation to die off and a new generation to be born who would be both willing and able to enter the Promised Land. Perhaps by combining the wisdom of the new generation of beginning teachers and the willingness of the older generation to engage in critical reflection, we can move closer to crossing over to Canaan.

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